

THE KEYTAR

The keytar was born out of guitar envy. For years, guitarists (and singers) had been running around the stage, gyrating and busting other radical moves. But even as keyboardists' importance grew with the advent of the synthesizer, they were forced to remain stationary behind a big ol' rig.

Freedom arrived in the '80s with this shoulder-hung keyboard with a guitar-style grip—often called a “keytar,” because nobody wanted to say, “Dude, nice shoulder-hung keyboard with a guitar-style grip!” It soon became a mainstay in concerts and on MTV. Popularized by artists like Prince and the New Power Generation, the Ohio Players, Herbie Hancock, and A Flock of Seagulls, keytars were as ubiquitous onstage as parachute pants in high school hallways.

The recently reinvigorated Moog Music Inc. created one of the first guitar-like keyboards in 1980. But the Moog Liberation model wasn't very liberating at all, weighing in at a TV-set-like 14 pounds. Devo used it, but quickly realized that one song with it around your neck was enough to give you whip-it-lash. Then a technological breakthrough, Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI), reduced the synthesizer to half its original size, making it lighter and more mobile. In 1984, Yamaha introduced the KX-5, which came in black and silver, and a year later, Roland debuted the Ferrari red Axis-1, the only keytar you can still find at your local musical-instrument store.

On the keytar's handle, similar in shape to the neck of a guitar, were wheels, switches, knobs, sliders, and buttons that controlled volume, pitch, sustain, and modulation. Not only could musicians play it like a guitar, they could make it sound like one, too. The allure for funk bands was that you could dance while fingering it. Larry Blackmon of Cameo may have been talking about their favorite new instrument in 1986 when he sang, “Yo pretty ladies around the world / Got a weird thing to show you, so tell all the boys and girls.” Word up.

Jonathan Lesser

KEYED UP:
Herbie Hancock rocks
San Francisco in 1981.



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